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Once Upon A Revision...

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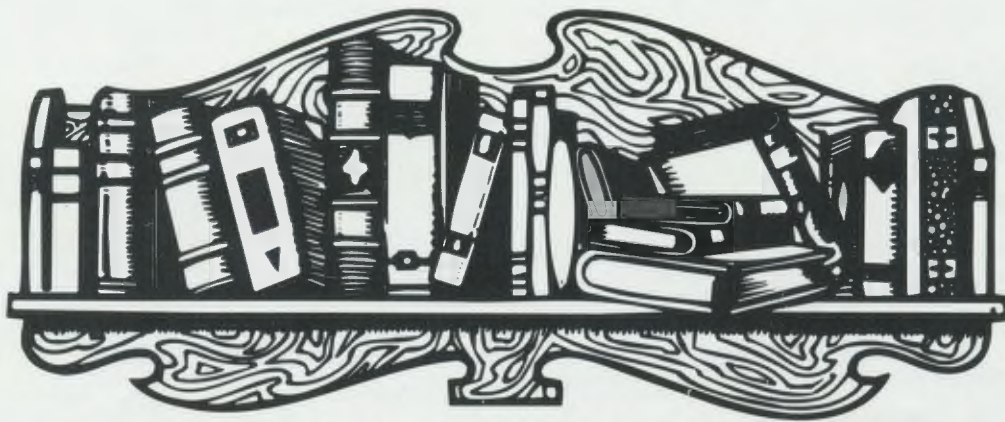
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Once Upon A Revision . . .



It's a downcast day in the enchanted forest.
The Big Bad Wolf is working his hide off doing community service. At the tender age of 13, Goldilocks is being charged with breaking and entering and the Fairy Godmother from Cinderella has been accused of cruelty to animals.

a commentary by Anthony Stefani



WALT DISNEY'S

Snow White
and the Seven Dwarfs

ranted, these scenarios are a little far fetched, but thanks to today's parents they could quite possibly appear at your local bookstore in the near future. Why the changes?

Adults have become amnesiac to the fact that these characters were originally designed to educate people and convey a message for leading a healthy life free of gin, sin and blowpops. Reacting to parental charges of heinous nursery crimes, publishers have begun sanitizing these children's classics—a move sure to make the Brothers Grimm cringe.

American and foreign publishers have turned children's fairy tale books into a potential pot of gold at the end of the reading rainbow. Publishers are printing so many new versions of old classics that it's impossible to keep count. The current edition of *Books in Print* lists 29 editions of *Three Little Pigs* and 30 of *Little Red Riding Hood*. Some of these renditions are not faithful to the traditional stories.

Little Golden Books, a division of Western Publishing Inc., seems to be following the trend of not following the classic versions. The company releases only one, watered-down version of each fairy tale they publish. In the past, the company had released as many as three versions of each story.

Diane McCue, rerun coordinator for storybooks at Western Publishing Inc., said the company has updated several tales, including *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, *Hansel and Gretel* and *Three Little Pigs*.

McCue added that Little Golden Books would be sticking with the Walt Disney versions of *Snow White* and *Cinderella* as opposed to the original ones. In the original version of *Cinderella*, the stepmother gives her daughters a knife so they can cut off part of their feet in order to fit them in the glass slipper. In *Snow White*, the wicked queen sends Snow White into the forest with a male escort who has been ordered to cut out her heart and return it to the queen. (Never fear, the escort lets Snow White go and presents the queen with an animal heart which he says belonged to the heroine.)

Neither scenario is used in the recent Little Golden versions. *Cinderella's* stepsisters are given almost no mention in the shoe-fitting scene. Snow White is sent to the forest with an unhappy huntsman who has been told to kill her, but in the forest, he drops to his knees and confesses everything. He tells the princess he will let her flee and will lie to the queen about killing her.

And when asked why the versions had been changed, McCue said, "Good children's stories should be entertaining and not violent."

Little Golden Books isn't the only company with watered-down tales. No one denies that in *Three Little Pigs*, the Big Bad Wolf falls down the pigs' brick-house chimney and into a pot of boiling water, but the end varies. In Walt Disney's 1993 pop-up book version of *Three Little Pigs* the Big Bad Wolf shoots back up the chimney, runs into the forest and never bothers the pigs again. Even Little Golden Books wasn't so nice to the villainous carnivore; in its 1988 version, the wolf is boiled alive in the pot.





In the original *Little Red Riding Hood*, the wolf is split open by the woodcutter's axe while Grandma and Little Red share a cup of wine in celebration. However, in a 1992 version by Mabel Watts, the woodcutter says to the wolf, "Now it's your turn to be afraid." The wolf yelps and takes off into the woods with the woodcutter close behind. And since Grandma would face charges of contributing to the delinquency of a minor if she let Little Red drink alcohol, the wine isn't even mentioned.

In Little Golden Book's older version of *Jack and the Beanstalk*, the giant is slain at the end. In the 1992 version, he is not. Instead, the new edition reads like this: "The giant crashed into the ground, deep into the earth and was gone forever."

"Some of the newer versions read like 'See Spot run,'" Kathryn Miller, associate professor of human development and family studies, said. Publishers are treating these stories as though they were modeling clay. They cut and paste until they think they have found a plausible compromise.

However, not everyone frowns upon these altered tales. In fact, Little Golden Books maintains that changing the stories hasn't stripped them of their meaning, but only of their vile content.

Despite her opposition to some of these "newer" versions, Miller said there are advantages to some of the alterations. "When these books are presented in good taste they're okay," Miller said. But, "I have a problem when people want to get rid of old versions and leave the new; especially if (the new) are of poor quality."

One advantage Miller and others see to having more than one version of these stories is that it allows for discussion among parents and children.

"When we see these old versions in comparison to the new, we can compare similarities and differences dealing with racism and moral values," Miller said. "It's up to the parent to make the message clear to the child."

William Panak, assistant professor of psychology, agreed that parents play a major role in how their children interpret these stories.

"I would be skeptical to say that it is really the content that affects the child," Panak said. "Kids can either be enriched and benefitted by folklore, or it can be used for negative purposes. If the story is multi-cultural, parents can use it as an enriching experience by explaining how people of different cultures live."

Panak believes parents should try to balance stories that are colorful and action-packed with those that have social themes. He said parents should discuss the content of stories with their children instead of assuming that they are getting something out of it.

"Parents supply genes, environment and books, but we don't know what effects a child's emotions," Panak said. "The sum total outcome of reading the new content of these books does not really have a cushion effect on kids."

While Panak, Miller and others agree that the original fairy tales were generally violent, they stress that these early versions were used to educate and not merely to entertain. Miller said that these early tales taught that crime doesn't always pay, that help and guidance are always available and that the villain always loses in the end.

As far as the alteration of gender roles in some tales, Miller said that she saw no problem in having an active male hero who at the end of a story loses his babe onto his horse and trots off into the sunset.

"There just needs to be balance," she said. "All of us need to find people like ourselves in books because it helps validate who we are. We can see our differences and what we share in common with different people."



WALT DISNEY'S

Sleeping Beauty



Perhaps Miller is right about our need to find others like ourselves in books, but publishing companies aren't taking any chances where content or characters are concerned. In the case of Little Golden Books, McCue said the company's main objective was to continue to make sure its books are both non-objective and fun to read.

McCue said that Western Publishing prefers to steer clear of controversy,

adding that the most recent alterations to these works are the result of frequent letters from parents requesting less violence in the stories to which their children are exposed.

So will all of this editing become a part of Tipper Gore's political agenda? Probably not.

Panak believes that in the future, when people realize that political correctness has just become a convenient label for anything culturally offensive, the pendulum may swing back. He adds that despite the violence some of the original stories may portray, life is too short to dwell on the dirty deeds of characters that only exist in one's mind.

"Would you go and revise the *Diary of Anne Frank*?" he asked. "Maybe it's better to make these more socially conscious and less politically correct."

However, if Panak is wrong and the present trend continues, the grimmest fairy tale is that publishers will continue to meddle with authentic literature and mythical characters will succumb to the bleeding-heart sensitivity of the '90s. Ultimately, quality will be sacrificed for the sake of moral preservation.

And while the wolf picks up trash at amusement parks, the queen orders Snow White to be grounded for a week and Little Red Riding Hood completes the 12-step rehabilitation program, the rest of us will live sappily ever after.

The End.